NEW
NICK CARTER
WEEKLY

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No. 509 NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 29, 1906. **Price, Five Cents**

THE "SKIDOO" OF THE K-U-&-T

OR NICK CARTER'S GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY CASE

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

"The deacon will now take the collection, and each passenger as he or she is approached, may take their hands down long enough to produce the deposits. Let your donations be liberal, please!"

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The "Skidoo" of the K. U. & T.

OR,

Nick Carter's Great Train Robbery Case.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A FIERY EYE IN THE NIGHT.

Train No. 9, on the K. U. & T. Railroad, pulled up at the small and unimportant station of Conyers, in obedience to a signal displayed by the station-agent, at 7:31, and the conductor dropped from the steps of one of the cars and ran hastily forward to find out what was the matter.

Train No. 9 was a flier; the pet train of the road, and was locally known by the significant title of "Skidoo." It was the rule along the line that everything should give way to that particular train, for it was the constant boast of the management that she was always on time.

She had been whirling along at a speed of something more than sixty miles an hour when the signal at Conyers was displayed and the cometlike mass of mechanism was brought to a stop.

It was unheard of. It was the first time in the career of the "Skidoo" that she had been flagged, for her schedule had been arranged so close to possibilities that it was regarded as an almost, if not quite impossible, feat for her to make up more than half a minute, or a minute, at the most, on any of her runs.

"What in ——" began the conductor, as he ran forward toward the agent; but the latter was waving a yellow order blank at him, and the conductor knew that he would find his answer to the questions he would have asked there.

But as he took the paper in his hand he could not refrain from putting the one question that was uppermost in his mind, and the affirmative of which he regarded as the only adequate excuse for the event.

"Wreck ahead?" he asked.

But he did not wait for the answer; nor did he see the shake of the agent's head, for he was already mastering the contents of the brief but imperative order.

Here it is exactly as he saw it:

"CALVERT, Condtr. No. 9: Take siding at Conyers for president's special to pass, bound west.

"SLANT, Despatcher."

"Huh!" grunted Calvert. Then realizing that possi-

bly he might not have more than sufficient time to get safely on the siding before the "president's special" would plunge past the station, and that he would have to get a move on at once, he asked rather shortly:

"Where's your confounded switch?"

"Eighty rods back up the line," replied the agent, waving his hand toward the direction indicated.

Calvert waved his signal to the engineer and swung upon the steps of one of the cars. The great train moved backward to the switch and there Calvert dropped off, and moved it, doing the work of one of his own trainmen.

He waited then for the train to move forward on the siding, replaced the switch, and then walked hurriedly toward the station again.

"It's an outrage," he began, when the agent interrupted him by placing a second order in his hands.

"Calvert, condtr. 9," he read. "President's train stalled nine miles east of Conyers. Engine broke down. Take your engine and pull her on siding at Conyers. Further orders when you report. SEANT, Despatcher."

The conductor was far too angry to swear; he only gritted his teeth, and then, quite mildly, he inquired of the agent:

"I wonder what he takes us for, anyhow?"

Calvert did not wait for an answer. It was evident that he did not care for one. His emotions were too mighty for expression; but if any one could have followed him as he walked out of the station he would have been heard to mutter:

"Just closing my record for the year, too. The three hundredth and sixty-fifth day, and never a minute lost till now. The president must be a——"

He didn't complete the sentence, for at that instant he encountered the engineer, who, as angry as he was himself, was rapidly approaching him.

"Jack," he exclaimed, "what the dev——"

Calvert threw up his hands in a gesture of despair.

"Don't say a word, Phil," he said. "If you do, I'll commit suicide. Read that, and then cut loose from the baggage. I'll run ahead to the switch, and I'll ride down the line with you if you'll slow up for me when you come along."

The engineer crushed the last order in his hands, and then he stalked moodily back to his cab, muttering unpleasant things in his whiskers as he went.

A moment later the great locomotive started leisurely down the track, crawled slowly past the switch, and stopped. The engineer was waiting for the conductor to replace the switch, and climb into the cab with him.

Then he moved his huge machine ahead again, with great deliberation.

"Seems like you ain't in any hurry, Phil," said Calvert, with an unpleasant laugh.

"Blowed if I am, Jack! I'd a whole lot rather be three hours late than three minutes."

"Right you are, Phil."

"Last day of a year's run, too."

The conductor nodded grimly.

"That fool president might have waited one more day to hold us up, Jack."

Calvert nodded again.

"And he ain't content with that," went on the engineer. "He must make us do the part of a yard switch-engine. By thunder, I'll——"

"Look here, Phil; there ain't any use of our kicking, is there? We couldn't go ahead on our time without trying to pass that special on the same track, could we? And we wouldn't be on time nohow if we tried that game, would we?"

"I'd like to be president of this road for about five minutes; that's what!" grunted the incensed engineer.

"What would be the first thing you would do?" asked Calvert, who was now regaining his natural good humor.

"I'd discharge that fool who is trying to be one, and don't know how, that's what!"

"Let her out another notch, Phil. We're just crawling. We haven't covered more'n half of that nine miles yet."

"I don't care if we don't get there till midnight. The despatcher is keeping the line clear for us. We might just as well be killed for an old sheep as a lamb, Jack."

"All the same——"

"Look here, Jack!" The engineer slowed his locomotive down still more and half-turned to the conductor, who was standing close beside him. "I'm mad—mad clear through. Here you and I have been using up everything inside of us for a hull year, trying to make the three hundred and sixty-five days without losing a minute; and we've done it, too, all but this day; and now this fool president moseys along the line in a special——"

"Maybe it's the President of the United States, Phil."

"I don't care if it's the president of the sun and all the rest of the planets. He's a-holding us up on our last day of the year when for three hundred and sixty-four days we ain't never lost a whole minute. It's a shame, that's what it is! And I don't care who hears me express that opinion."

"It'll be a year to-morrow, Phil, since we shook hands over the start of this train and swore to each other that we'd bring her through——"

"Ain't I remembering it, Jack? I'm going to work her now so's to be about three or four hours late, I am. I'll hold up the whole line to wait for us wherever there is a chance to do it. I'll loaf along to beat the band, Jack; you see."

"What good'll that do, Phil?"

"It'll put it up to them as made us take a siding, that's what!"

The conductor made no comment.

"As long as we've *got* to be late," continued the engineer, "I'm going to be so *cussed* late that they can't never lay it to us."

"You are making about six miles an hour now, Bill."

"Six is enough. Three would be more to my taste. How far down the line did he say that special was stalled?"

"Nine miles."

"Well, we're about half-way there now, then."

"It will be quite dark in five minutes more, Phil."

"I don't care. I'm mad, I tell you."

"So am I; but that won't help us any. It's a whole lot better to be side-tracked than to have bumped head-on into that special, ain't it?"

"I suppose so."

"And we may as well get over our mad, Phil, and decide to make the best of it. After all, it ain't our fault, and it won't hurt our record any. It's orders from up above, and our record for the three hundred and sixty-four days is the best that was ever made on any road in the country, when all is said. Let her out a little, Phil; there's a good chap."

The engineer reluctantly obeyed, and the big locomotive darted ahead at an accelerated pace.

They were now approaching a curve in the road at which it was always policy to go as slowly as the speed schedule would permit, but Phil Dempsey was one of the few engineers on the line of whom it was said that he "never saw a curve."

Nevertheless he was regarded as their best man. He was cool-headed, clear-sighted, and he had the nerve which was required of the engineer of a great train like the "Skidoo."

Now he gave the throttle another pull, for he, too, was recovering his wonted good nature.

"All right, Jack," he said.

They approached the curve and swung around the worst part of it while the speed of the locomotive increased perceptibly with every plunge of the pistons.

Still, she was not moving at "speed"; and as it presently happened, it was the greatest good fortune to the three men on that machine that she was not.

The first part of the curve was passed, and the locomotive swung into a straight stretch of road that was something less than a mile in length, and at the end of which there was another curve not so sharp and bad as the one just passed.

They had covered about half that distance to the second curve, when suddenly the engineer and the conductor, who were gazing ahead of them along the rails, uttered the same frightened exclamation in unison.

"Great heavens!" they cried.

It was a cry of reverence and of terror as well; for there, directly ahead of them and on the same track, plunging toward them at an apparently frightful rate of speed, the brilliant, fiery eye of the headlight of another locomotive suddenly appeared.

Phil Dempsey threw on his brake, closed his throttle, reversed his lever, and opened the throttle again apparently with one motion.

Then he leaped from his high seat and following the impulse of Calvert, he jumped into the space between engine and tender, and with a wild cry to the fireman to jump for his life, he hurled himself from the foot-board into space.

CHAPTER II.

THE TRAIN-ROBBERS' GREAT HOLD-UP.

It will be remembered that the time when the train was held up on the siding at Conyers station by the flagging of the station-agent was just on what might be called the edge of the evening.

The locomotive, bearing the engineer and fireman and Jack Calvert, the conductor of the train, had not disappeared down the road when, from six different points along the track, as many men appeared suddenly on horseback.

There were three on either side of the railroad. Two appeared at either end of the train—opposite one another, of course—and two others were at the point which was nearest to the baggage-car.

Every man of the six wore a half-mask; each carried a Winchester repeating rifle, and they were all otherwise armed to the teeth.

They seemed to have planned the raid perfectly.

There was not a word spoken between them.

One, who appeared to be the leader, called out, as soon as he appeared in sight, to the groups of passengers who had left the cars to inquire into the cause of the stoppage.

"Hands up! Everybody!" he cried out, in a voice which penetrated to the interior of the Pullman cars and coaches. "Anybody who disobeys will be shot without mercy."

To emphasize the force of this statement, the men at the ends of the train sent a few bullets whispering along the sides of the cars as a warning for the passengers to put their heads inside and to keep them there; and instantly the trainmen and passengers who were on the roadway along the sides of the train obeyed the order and elevated their hands.

Then the two who were nearest the express-car approached it, and one of them called out to the messenger, using his name as if he were well known to them:

"Open the door, Billy, and do it quick! We won't ask the second time. After I count ten, if both the side doors aren't open wide, we will blow it to blazes and you with it."

There was something of determination in the voice of

the robber which compelled the messenger to obey instantly.

"Throw out the safes, Billy!" the robber ordered them. "There are two of them this trip. You see we know what we are about. That's right. Now jump out yourself and open them. Quick, Billy, if you wish ever to see your little kids again."

Billy Simpson obeyed at once, for there was a suggestion in that last remark which made him suddenly realize all that it would mean to his home, if he were killed here, in cold blood.

That is, he obeyed as far as the jumping out of the car was concerned; and also he produced a key and opened one of the safes.

But when that was done he turned to one of the robbers who was standing near him, and said:

"I can't open the other safe. It locks with a combination, as you see. It was delivered to me locked, and I do not know the combination. That's the truth, captain, so help me!"

"Oh, we know that, Billy," was the cool reply. "But all the same you will have to open it."

Billy grinned, for he was not badly frightened, and he regarded this as a joke. He had been in hold-ups before, and he knew by experience that there is no real personal danger to be encountered in an affair of that kind unless one refuses to obey the orders of the robbers or attempts to fight against them. In such cases they kill instantly and without mercy.

"You'll have to make me blow it open, in that case," he said, "for it's the truth I tell you. I don't know the combination."

"Here, you!" the robber called to several men with their hands in the air, who were near them. "Take hold of that safe and help Billy to put it on its legs. That's right. Now heave all together. So!

"Now, hands up, every cussed one of you, and back away ten feet. That's it!

"Now, Billy, get down on your knees in front of that safe!"

Billy obeyed with a shrug of his shoulders.

"You'll believe me when——" he began, but the robber interrupted him sharply.

"Shut up!" he said, "and do as you're told!"

"All right," muttered the messenger, in reply.

"Now, Billy," continued the robber, "take hold of that dial and turn to the right to 12, and stop. Have you done that?"

"Yes."

"Now turn to the left to 47, and stop. Have you done that?"

"Yes."

"Did you turn it around twice, Billy?"

"No; I did as you told me to do."

"All right; now go on around again to the left to 47 again, and stop. I forgot to tell you to turn it around twice. Is that done?"

"Yes."

"Good! Now turn to the right again to 95. Got that?"

"Yes."

"Do it again, Billy; same thing."

"All right."

"Now do it once more, and this time when you get to 95 stop there. Got that?"

"Yes."

"Now turn your dial to the left till it stops itself. How's that, Billy?"

"It's wonderful. I——"

"Turn the handle, Billy, and open the safe door. *There!* how's that, Simpson; eh?"

"It beats the devil!" replied Billy, in amazement.

"Sure! That's what we're here for. Didn't I tell you that you would open the safe for me all the same, even if you didn't know the combination?"

"You sure did."

"Now shove your feelers inside and pull out the boodle, Billy. That's right."

The robber kicked a burlap sack toward the messenger with his foot, and added:

"Put the dough in that, Billy. There is quite a wad of it, isn't there?"

Billy Simpson did not reply to this remark, although he did exactly as he was told to do.

Package after package that was nicely wrapped in yellow paper and tied with twine and sealed with wax, was tumbled into the sack until it was nearly filled, and until the safe was entirely empty. Then the robber said:

"Now, Billy, you can cut the twine from one of the packages and use it to tie up the mouth of the bag. *So!* That's the idea."

When the messenger had complied with this order the robber said to him:

"Now, Billy, have you got a gun in your pocket?"

"Yes; two of 'em," replied the messenger.

"All right. I see you do want to see your kids again, Billy, and you do quite right, for we mean business in this outfit. You can walk over to your car now, and sit down on the lowest step. There isn't much in that other safe, but we'll take what there is, just the same."

He turned to one of the trainmen then, and added:

"Billy has done his part all right, and now I'll have to ask you to do something for us."

The trainman looked badly frightened; but he said:

"Yes, sir."

"Take a walk back through the train. Just say to the passengers as you enter each car, that I want them all to step outside, *on this side*, and line up along the main track, between the rails. Tell them to keep their hands in the air all the time if they wish to reach the end of

this journey; and tell them that I shall go through the cars presently myself, and if I find that anybody has refused to obey the order to come outside it'll be bad medicine, for I shall shoot the first living thing I see when I go through the cars. Skip, now!"

The trainman obeyed; and presently, while the robbers kept guard with their Winchesters trained along the sides of the cars, the passengers—men and women, young and old—descended the steps of the cars and one by one assumed the positions that had been demanded of them, between the rails of the main track.

A sharp order to the station-agent and to the others who were already outside the train sent them to join the line thus formed; and then, with two of the robbers at either end of the long line, the remaining two began, one at each end, to walk along in front of it, each with a yawning burlap bag in his hands.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," called out the thief, who was one of the robbers who remained at the end of the line, "this is a donation-party. I'm the 'joker' in this little game. Deacon 'Right Bower' and Deacon 'Left Bower' will pass the plate, and you are requested to drop your wads into the bags for the good of the heathen. Your watches and any jewelry of value, such as rings and stick-pins that you happen to have about you, must go with the wads, with the exception that the ladies may retain their rings and such ornaments as they are wearing at the present moment.

"I need only remind you that we won't stand for any foolishness. If any one of you tries to 'do' us, it will be very bad for that particular person. The deacons will now take the collection, and each passenger, as he or she is approached, may take down his or her hands long enough to produce the deposits—and then hands up again instantly.

"Let your donations be liberal, please!"

There was no person along that line who thought of resisting, for each realized how futile such an attempt would have been; and in a surprisingly short time the work was done, and the two bags were placed alongside of the other two which contained the contents of the safes.

That done, three of the robbers remained on guard at either end of the line of passengers while the remaining three entered the cars and passed through them.

On this journey they deliberately disgorged the contents of bags, satchels, and dress-suit cases upon the seats of the cars and selected from the débris anything and everything that they espied that was of value.

Then they leaped to the ground again, and the leader of the robbers called out to his victims:

"We are all through, now. I shall ask all of you to pass in Indian file into the rear car, if you please—by the front door. You will pack the car rather full, I'm afraid, but it cannot be helped, and you won't have to stay there very long. I shall myself stand at the door as you go inside—so don't try to object, please."

There was a moment of waiting, and then the robber cried:

"Left foot forward! One, two, three—*march!*"

There was a ludicrous side to the scene, of course; there always is to such scenes; but there was no resistance offered, and the passengers, trainmen, the station-agent, and the two or three loiterers who had been hanging around the station at the time of the stopping of the "Skidoo," packed themselves into the car.

The chief of the bandits, who had stationed himself, not at the door, but close beside the steps of the car, where the passengers climbed into it, watched narrowly the face of each one as they passed him, and with a touch of gallantry he assisted each of the women to the high step.

The end of the line was almost reached, and there remained only a few more passengers to pass him, when he said in a low tone to one of the ladies whom he seemed about to assist into the car as he had done with the others:

"I shall ask you and your companion, who is behind you to step to one side for a moment," and with gentle but irresistible force he drew the young woman to one side and passed her behind him, doing the same with her companion.

A moment later the passengers were all inside the car—that is, all but these two.

Then the door was closed and locked after each one of the occupants of the car had been warned that no immediate effort must be made to leave it.

After that there was silence outside the car, where darkness had now fallen; a silence which was only broken by the occasional *chang!* of a Winchester, as warning shots were sent along the sides of the cars.

And after a little that, too, ceased.

CHAPTER III.

ONE EXPLANATION OF THE MYSTERY.

And, now, just one more scene of this remarkable train robbery—or, rather, one more scene that is directly associated with it. We must return for a moment to the impending catastrophe of the locomotive.

We were there when the engineer and fireman jumped from the foot-board just as the conductor had done an instant before them.

It has already been stated that the locomotive upon which they were riding was not going very fast; in fact, the great mass of iron and steel had only "crawled" from the time when the train of cars had been left behind.

True, the engineer, Phil Dempsey, had just opened the

throttle, but the engine had only begun to increase its speed when the collision occurred.

It was also said that the approaching locomotive—the one with which a collision was inevitable—seemed to be rushing toward them at frightful speed.

In reality, however, this was only a "seem so"; for when the great fiery eye appeared so suddenly in front of them from around the curve, there was no possibility for them to judge of the speed at which it was traveling.

When Jack Calvert leaped from the foot-board to the ground and rolled over and over, scrambling with all his might to get as far away from the tracks as possible so that the great mass of wreckage would not fall upon him, it seemed to him that the time was interminable until he heard the crash of the meeting of the two monsters.

In reality the time did not exceed two seconds; but seconds are long intervals when instants, which are fractional parts of seconds, count.

The crash came when the locomotive from which they had jumped had covered another hundred feet of distance.

The two engines met, crashed together, bounded back without either of them leaving the rails, rushed together again, bounded away once more, but not as far as the first time, shuddered, came together again, and for a moment remained motionless on the tracks as if each were endeavoring to push the other out of its way.

And so they remained until Phil Dempsey had leaped to his feet and stood looking at them in utter amazement.

But he saw instantly that the affair was not half, not a quarter, as bad as he had supposed it would be.

There was no train of cars behind that other locomotive; it had been traveling slowly, like his own engine.

The impact had been heavy, of course; but the great monsters were also heavy.

Each had refused to leave the track.

Their headlights and cowcatchers had been carried away and smashed; the smoke-stacks were knocked awry, and they were otherwise dismantled and damaged; but neither was put out of commission—and what was stranger still, the locomotive with which they had collided had been running wild, without a guiding hand at the throttle and levers.

Nobody had leaped from its cab. No fireman or engineer had been upon it to jump away out of danger.

Dempsey saw this fact instantly, and with a bound he started toward it, at the same time calling out to his fireman:

"Get aboard Ninety-nine, Mike, and stop her."

It was only a moment after that when the two locomotives had ceased their struggles to pass each other on the same track, or to push each other out of the way, and they stood there puffing like two giant monsters that had stopped to rest after a battle.

Then Dempsey leaped to the ground again.

"What in blazes does it mean, Jack?" he asked of the conductor, who had been a silent spectator of this scene.

"Search me, Phil! I give it up. What do you think?"

"What I want to know is this," replied Phil. "Shall we drag that engine back with us to where we left our train, or shall we back her up toward the direction from which she came, and find out what has happened?"

"If we go back to our own train," said Calvert, "we won't be a mite better off than we were before."

"That's so—unless we find more orders at Conyers station."

Calvert sniffed contemptuously.

"Orders!" he said. "Orders have come near to putting us all out of business. If there are orders waiting for us back there—they can wait, till we get there."

"Right you are, Jack."

"So I think we will keep on the way we started and see what has happened to the special."

"You're right again."

While Dempsey was talking he had been engaged in examining the strange engine and he had succeeded in making out her number.

"This must be one of those two new big express-freight engines that we've heard about," he said. "I wonder how she happened to be running wild. But I reckon we'd better be movin' and *seein'* what has happened, instead of staying here and *guessin'*."

He told the conductor to get aboard their own engine with the fireman, and directed the latter to follow him; and then he climbed aboard the stranger, and began to back her slowly along the track in the direction from which she had appeared.

They rounded the curve, and after running slowly for a distance of five miles, they came to another siding, where the cars of a freight-train that they were supposed to pass at that point every day were drawn up, waiting.

And the crew of the freight were seated near a fire which they had started in the middle of the main track, smoking.

But these men were not slow to discover that two locomotives, instead of one, were approaching, and they rose as with one accord to wait for them.

When Calvert leaped to the ground, he rushed forward to the trainmen.

"What in blazes is the matter with you fellows?" he demanded, in some heat.

"Hold-up," was the laconic reply of the conductor of the freight.

"Hold-up! What kind of a hold-up?" demanded Calvert again.

"I never heard of but one kind; did you?" replied the conductor.

"Yes; there are two kinds. The station-agent held me up at Conyers, with orders from the despatcher. What held you up?"

"Train-robbers—no less."

"Eh? What? You don't say!"

"I do, though."

"How the devil did your engine get away from you and go up the track and almost put us out of business? And where is that infernal special?"

"Go a leetle slow, Calvert, and I'll try to answer you."

"I never heard of a freight-train being held up before," sniffed Calvert.

"Well, you've heard of something new, then. The engine got away because the robbers took her away, and as for a special—I ain't heard of none."

"How'd they get your engine?"

"They took it. Said they was a-goin' up the road a piece, and that after we had waited an hour we could send up along the road after the locomotive. We figured out that it was all an attempt to wreck the 'Skidoo.'"

"Do you mean to say that you thought that, and have made no attempt to——"

"Softly, Calvert, softly, if you please. I have sent one man back on a run to Jasper to use the wires about it, and I have sent two more sneaking ahead, to see what has happened and to do what can be done. You see, the 'Skidoo' hasn't shown up, and I had about come to the conclusion that you were all in the ditch somewhere. We was talkin' about it when you came in sight. What——"

"Wait, please. How did they get your engine?"

"Just moseyed up and helped themselves. We were on the siding waiting for you to pass. Three of them came out of the bushes, held us up, took the engine, and —you know the rest as well as we do."

"And you haven't heard of any special?"

"Nary one."

"You didn't get orders at Jasper to wait here for *two* trains to pass? Ours, and a special that was following you with the president aboard?"

"No; I didn't. We got our regular orders, that's all; to wait here till you passed and then proceed."

"It beats the devil!" ejaculated Calvert.

"It sure does, Jack. Say, where's your train? Were you held up? Are you in the ditch?"

"No. The despatcher sent orders to stop me at Conyers station. Then other orders came that the locomotive of the special had broken down and we were sent along to help her out. I left my train in safety, on the siding back at Conyers."

The conductor of the freight-train laughed aloud.

"Good!" he said. "You left her in safety, all right, but you will find when you get back there that there has been a hold-up, all right."

"I guess that's right."

"Sure it's right. Say! where did you find our engine, Jack?"

"We stopped it, head on, just around the curve, five miles back. Go and look at the both of them."

The freight conductor chuckled again.

"You'll be a little late, won't you, Jack?" he asked.

"Late? No. I'll be on time—to-morrow."

The freight conductor turned to Dempsey now.

"Will that engine of ours pull us out of here?" he asked.

"Yes. She'll take you to the end of your trail, all right."

"Then we'll go along with you as far as Conyers. We can get orders there, and I reckon the track is safe that far, if your 'Skidoo' cars are standing on the siding there."

Calvert rode in the caboose of the freight, on the return, and there he related to his friend the whole story of the telegraphic orders he had received from the time of the stopping of the flier until the present moment.

The freight conductor listened attentively, and at the finish of the story he said:

"Jack, I think that those orders were fakes."

"Eh? How could that be so?"

"I don't know how it could be so, but I think it is so. I'll bet that the despatcher is burnin' up the wires trying to find you and me, right now. You ought to be about eighty-five miles east of here at the present moment, and I ought to be about twenty-five west of Conyers. You haven't been heard from since you left Peachblow, west of Conyers, and I haven't been heard from since I left Jasper—and there you are. It's a hundred to a doughnut that the despatcher thinks we are both smashed up."

"I guess you're right," said Calvert.

"And I think I see through the whole game now," continued the freight conductor.

"How so? What do you make of it?"

"Why, the whole thing is just a scheme of the train-robbers. Part of 'em came here and stole our engine. The rest of 'em went to Conyers, and as soon as you had pulled out of there with your engine, they swooped down on the express-car, and——"

"But what about those orders, man?"

"Huh! That's easy. They have sent another man into the woods somewhere. He has taken a loop of the wire along with him and set up an instrument—or, rather, two sets of instruments. He has taken off and then forwarded such orders as did not interfere with their plans, and he has changed orders that did interfere, to suit himself. The orders that you received, he made up out of whole cloth. That's all."

CHAPTER IV.

THE ROBBERS' BIGGEST STEAL.

When Nick Carter took hold of the case, he was ushered into the private office of the president of the K. U. & T. Railway, where that gentleman was seated with two others, awaiting him.

He stopped just inside the door, and after a quick glance around him, he said, addressing the president of the road:

"I expected, Mr. Winslow, to find you alone."

"Come in, Mr. Carter, come in!" exclaimed the president, rising. "These gentlemen are as deeply interested as I am in this affair; I don't know but I should say, more deeply interested. This gentleman is Mr. Henry Whitney, the president of the express company, which lost four hundred and forty thousand dollars in cash at the robbery; and this is Mr. Ralph Overton, who has met with a still greater loss. He has lost his daughter."

"His *daughter!*" exclaimed Nick. "I had heard nothing about that."

"No; it has been kept from the reporters. It has not been announced in the papers."

"Do you mean," asked Nick, "that he lost his daughter in that train-robbery at Conyers?"

"Exactly."

"How is that, please? I am amazed."

"The robbers spirited her away."

"Do you mean that she was abducted by force, or killed, or what?"

"I mean that she has disappeared. That is all we know."

"Tell me about it in as few words as possible, Mr. Winslow. I mean, give me merely the salient points of the disappearance of the young woman."

Then he turned to the others, and added:

"I will ask you two gentlemen to remain silent, if you please, until I question you. If I get at the first facts in my own way, it sometimes saves a great deal of time."

They nodded, and Nick said:

"Now, Mr. Winslow, if you please."

"We know nothing of the disappearance," replied the railway president, "save that after the passengers of the train had been lined up along the track and robbed—you know about that part of it, of course?"

"Yes; go on."

"After they had been lined up and robbed, they were marched back into the rear car and the doors of that car were locked upon them."

"Yes."

"More than an hour passed before they were liberated—in fact, it was generally supposed that the robbers had probably left one of their number on guard near the station, to shoot anybody who would appear while their partners in crime were making good their escape with the spoils, and it was not until the locomotive returned with the conductor, and the crew of the express-freight arrived on the scene, that they were liberated from the car.

"Some time after that the 'Skidoo' proceeded on its way, and Miss Overton was not missed at all until the porter of her car had passed through the train in search of her, and had reported to the conductor that she could not be found."

"That was considerably later, I suppose?" asked Nick.

"Two or three hours. It was toward midnight. Miss Overton and her friend—May Yearney, by name—occupied, together, the stateroom of the car which was used as a temporary prison by the robbers. It was supposed that they had gone directly inside upon returning to the car and had locked the door, for it was locked, and the key was missing."

"I see."

"The porter approached the door several times, to make up the berths, but the door remained closed and locked. At last he rapped upon it and received no reply. He rapped again and again, with the same result.

"Then he called the conductor, and with a duplicate key they opened the door."

"And found that Miss Overton had disappeared, eh?"

"Not only that; the room was empty."

"Eh?"

"I mean that her baggage and that of Miss Yearney had also disappeared. The room had been stripped. Their light wraps were gone; their bags were gone; their hats and gloves, which they had removed upon entering the car, were gone—and it has been discovered since that the baggage-car of the train had been entered, and that the four trunks owned by the young ladies had also been taken."

"I suppose," said the detective, after a considerable pause, during which he turned this information carefully over in his mind, "I presuppose from your manner that nothing has been heard of or concerning the young ladies since that time?"

"Nothing."

"And, of course, the robbers have escaped entirely, leaving no clue? Otherwise you would not have sent for me."

"We know absolutely no more about the affair than has appeared in print in the papers, Mr. Carter."

The detective turned to the father of the young lady who had disappeared, and said:

"Mr. Overton, I appreciate the fact that your loss is a thousandfold greater than that of your friends here. If I seem to abandon or to neglect your side of the question for a few moments, I hope you will not be impatient. I am keeping it in mind all the time."

"Yes, sir; I understand," replied the father.

Nick turned again to the president of the road.

"Mr. Winslow," he said, "my understanding of the case is this: The 'Skidoo,' your fastest and best train, was

stopped at Conyers station upon a telegraphic order supposed to have been sent by your train-despatcher, in which the conductor of that train was ordered to take the siding there, and wait for a special, bearing yourself, to pass."

"Yes."

"A few moments later a second order was received, in which it was stated that the locomotive of your train had broken down, nine miles down the line, and the locomotive of the 'Skidoo' was directed to proceed to your assistance. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"The engine, bearing the engineer, fireman, and conductor of the 'Skidoo,' hurried away with the locomotive, and somewhere down the line they came into collision with the locomotive of your fast freight, which was running wild, under very slow speed."

"Yes."

"To return to the passenger-train: As soon as the locomotive had disappeared, the train-robbers rode out of the woods, and, after robbing the express-car, they lined up the passengers and robbed them, relieving them one and all of their money and valuables."

"Yes."

"After that, the robbers went through the train itself, now empty, and rifled the contents of the hand-baggage from one end of it to the other, taking everything of value that they could find."

"That is true, too."

"And after all that was done, the passengers were driven into one car, locked in, and the robbers rode away. That is all correct, isn't it?"

"Perfectly."

"And now we find that, in addition to all that, the robbers also took not only the hand-baggage and wearing-apparel of two young ladies, but that they also found the checks for their trunks—four in number—and by that means identified the trunks, which they probably threw out of the car and also carried away with them."

"That is the situation, sir."

"Miss Overton and her traveling companion were not missed until several hours later, and I take it that their trunks were not missed until some days later; eh?"

"They were missed, of course, by the baggage-master of the train, when he checked off his baggage at the end of his run, but that was not until 10:30 the next morning. He made a report of it in the usual way, but the fact that the baggage—that the trunks were missing—was not really known to me, or outside the baggage department, until yesterday."

The railroad president coughed, and Nick Carter smiled.

"I suppose," said the detective dryly, "that it is thought prudent in the baggage department to refrain from making an unnecessary report of missing baggage until some one appears to inquire about it. That, following out that policy, nothing was said of the missing checks which represented four trunks until Mr. Overton began to make a search for his daughter's trunk, hoping in that way to get some trace of her."

"I am afraid, Mr. Carter, that I am compelled to admit that you are correct about that. It shall never happen again on our line, however."

"I quite believe you, Mr. Winslow. The robbery occurred a week ago yesterday, did it not?"

"Yes."

"And during that time you have thoroughly exhausted every remedy in your power to find trace of the robbers?"

"Yes."

"May I ask what has been done, exactly?"

"The sheriffs of two adjoining counties out there have done their utmost. They organized posses and went in pursuit of the robbers; they——"

"I know pretty well what sheriffs' posses accomplish," said Nick.

"We have sent all our own special men to the scene. The express company has sent their men to the scene. The Pinkertons have had and still have the matter in hand, and there are I do not know how many private detectives at work on the case, on their own responsibilities, in an effort to win the reward that has been offered."

"That reminds me," said Nick, "I shall have to ask you to withdraw the offer of those rewards. They aggregate twenty-five thousand dollars, do they not?"

"Yes."

"They must be withdrawn—all of them—if I take the case."

"But, my dear sir——"

"It is a condition precedent to my acceptance of the case," said the detective quietly. "If you had sent for me at once, the rewards would never have been offered at all."

Henry Whitney, the president of the express company, left his chair with a snort of scorn and contempt in his tone, as he said pointedly:

"Mr. Nick Carter declines to run the chance of having to share the reward of twenty-five thousand dollars with others, Winslow." Then he turned to Nick, and added:

"I tell you frankly, Carter, that the express company will not withdraw its offer of reward, no matter whether you take the case or not. We have offered five thousand, the railroad has offered five thousand, and Mr. Overton has offered fifteen. My five thousand shall remain, no matter what these gentlemen decide to do; and, by thunder, if they *do* withdraw their offers, as you suggest, I will increase my own offer to twenty thousand. You are not going to be permitted to crowd out good men, like the

Pinkertons and some of my own private staff of detectives! Not much."

Nick had turned to him quietly while he was expressing himself, and he did not interrupt.

But when the president of the express company had ceased speaking, he said quietly:

"Mr. Whitney, I will not take your part of the case now, if you offer a hundred thousand or a million. I am worth rather more than a million of my own, thank you. For you, gentlemen," he continued, turning to the others, "I wish your offers of reward withdrawn entirely—to others and to me as well. I shall charge you for my time and for my expenses; nothing more. And to you, Mr. Overton, I will say this: I will search for, and I will find, your daughter without reward."

Then he left his chair and crossed to the door.

"Mr. Overton," he said, from there, "I am at the Langhorne Hotel. If you will call around there in an hour, I would like to talk with you. And you, also, Mr. Winslow."

CHAPTER V.

NICK CARTER FORGIVES.

It was just an hour later when Nick Carter, seated in his room at the Langhorne Hotel, received the cards of Mr. Ralph Overton and Mr. Herbert Winslow, and he directed that they be shown up at once.

As soon as they entered the room, Winslow, with a smile on his face, said:

"Carter, you gave Whitney about the worst—and the best—talking down I ever had the fun of hearing."

"He deserved it," replied the detective.

"To be sure he did. He is mighty sorry now for what he said and did."

"I haven't a doubt of it."

"He is below, in the hotel office, waiting until I present his apologies to you. He wishes to retract all he said, and to beg your pardon for it; and he would like to join with us in this conference."

The detective turned the bell again, and when a servant appeared himself:

"You will find a Mr. Henry Whitney waiting in the office below. Say to him that we are waiting for him."

It was only a few moments later when Whitney appeared, and at once he began a profuse apology; but the detective stopped him ere he had uttered half a dozen words.

"We will forget all about it, Mr. Whitney," he said. "That will be the easiest way. I naturally resented what you said, and your manner of saying it, but I appreciate the fact that this affair has been a source of great worry to you, and that you have thought it best to go ahead under the old methods of offering rewards and betting the best, or the lucky, man win it."

"That is quite true, Mr. Carter."

"I asked for the withdrawal of the promise of reward merely because such promises attract a great many so-called detectives, who have not the slightest qualification for the work, and they only hamper the conduct of a case."

"I suppose you are right."

"It is particularly true when a case is as old as this one. It is more than a week now since the robbery. If your men who seek only the reward could accomplish anything, they would have had something to report before this. Now, they would hinder me in my work very greatly."

"They shall not do so. Of course, I don't want to call off our regularly paid men."

"You need call nobody off at all. I only ask that the offer of reward be withdrawn; and I was entirely sincere when I said that I wish no reward at all, other than the payment of my bill when it is rendered."

"Very well, sir."

"It is apparent to me, gentlemen," said Nick then, addressing them all, "that this robbery was the fruition of a very carefully perfected plan. Now, with your indulgence, I will begin again with Mr. Winslow; and I beg that each of you will only reply to questions that are addressed directly to you. In that manner we can cover the ground much more quickly, and my information will be in the shape I desire it."

They all nodded an affirmative to this request.

"Now, Mr. Winslow," said the detective, "your despatcher, of course, knows nothing at all about those orders delivered by the station-agent to the conductor of the 'Skidoo'?"

"Nothing, Mr. Carter."

"One account in the paper states that, about two miles from the spot where the robbery took place, a loop had been carried from the telegraph-wire into the woods. Is that correct, sir?"

"Yes."

"And that when the robbers were through with the use of that loop, they merely connected the ends of the wires and then carried their two sets of instruments away with them?"

"Yes."

"Leaving you to discover the fact that the wire had been tampered with as best you could, eh?"

"Yes."

"I don't suppose you have talked personally with your telegraph operator at Conyers?"

"No. I have not seen him."

"Telegraph operators usually know the writing of men—the key-writing, understand—with whom they are in daily communication. Has there been any statement made to you, indirectly, on that point?"

"No, sir."

"The office of your train despatcher is here in Monkton City, is it not?"

"Yes."

"You have talked with the despatcher himself about this affair, haven't you?"

"Certainly."

"What does he say about it that is pertinent to the case?"

"He knows nothing about it, save that he almost went crazy that evening. He couldn't discover the location of the 'Skidoo' train. He couldn't find her anywhere. She had left Peachblossom, and she had not reached Jasper. The freight had left Jasper, and had not arrived at Peachblossom. Conyers, which is half-way between the two, did not reply to the calls—and yet the line worked perfectly. There was an interval of two hours when he stopped every train on the road that was anywhere near those points, or which could arrive there, and then suddenly he got Conyers again, and the agent there told him all about what had happened."

"Is this the first hold-up that has happened on your system?"

"It is the first since I have been connected with the road, the first, in fact, in many years. I thought that the train hold-ups had gone out of fashion, and now we get this one."

"Precisely. What sort of a station is Conyers?"

"It is only a station; that is all. There is no village there; not even a settlement."

"Why is the station there at all?"

"It is the nearest point—and the most convenient place—for the surrounding district. Besides, there is water there. It is also at the top of a grade."

"How far away is the nearest house?"

"Ten miles, due north. Straightaway from the railway."

"Where does the station-agent live?"

"In a small house close to the station. He has a homestead grant there."

"And a family?"

"Yes, I believe so. I really do not know much about him."

"He is the telegraph operator, I suppose?"

"I think so. I don't know."

"What do you know about the crews of those two trains? The 'Skidoo' and the fast freight from which the engine was stolen?"

"The crew of the 'Skidoo' is a picked one; the oldest men, in point of service, and the best men on the road."

"And the freight?"

"I know nothing in particular about that crew."

"I suppose that every man who was present at that robbery—I refer, of course, to the men in your employ—has been questioned by your regular detectives."

"I suppose so."

"Do you recall anything that has been reported to you which you regard as worthy of repeating to me?"

"No; only one point, and that one really comes under Mr. Whitney's part of the affair."

"What is it?"

"I refer to the fact that the chief of the robbers knew the combination to the safe containing the large sum of money that was stolen."

"I read that account in one of the papers. I will ask Mr. Whitney about it presently. I suppose a great many complaints have been made to you by the passengers of that train?"

"I should say there had!"

"Have any suits been begun against you?"

"No. Not yet. Several are threatened; but I have received many letters."

"I wish you would have those letters put together, and send them to me before I start for the West to-night; will you?"

"Yes. Do you intend to go on to-night?"

"Surely. At midnight, on the west-bound 'Skidoo.'"

"You will ride with the same crew that were aboard when the train was robbed, then?"

"Yes. That is why I have decided to take that train. They run out of here only every second night, don't they?"

"Yes."

"And the conductor's name?"

"Is John Calvert. The engineer is Philip Dempsey."

"How about the express messenger?" asked the detective, suddenly turning to Whitney.

"He has been laid off," was the laconic response.

"My dear sir, how foolish! May I beg that you will make use of the telephone over there in the corner——By the way, though, does Billy Simpson, as he is called, live here in Monkton?"

"Yes."

"Then may I ask if you will be so good as to telephone an order that he be sent for and notified to take his regular car out to-night? There is plenty of time."

"Mr. Carter," said the express president, "you will upset our entire system, if you——"

"Mr. Whitney, I honestly believe that I will upset a great deal of your system before I am through with this case. But really, gentlemen, if you wish me to succeed in this matter, you must aid me in every way you can, and not hinder me at all; least of all, by any regard for red-tape proceedings."

President Whitney smiled.

"All right, Carter," he said. "You need not call me down again. For the present, you can be High Muck-a-muck of the express company, and the railroad, too, if you wish. Eh, Winslow?"

"I shall be only too glad," replied the president of the railroad.

"Now," said the detective, after Whitney had telephoned the order directing that Simpson be given his regular car that night, "what do you know about Simpson, Mr. Whitney?"

"He has the record of being one of our best and most reliable men," was the reply.

"Why did you lay him off, then?"

"As a matter of principle."

"What sort of principle?"

"Well, he lost the money that was placed in his care."

"Do you consider that he lost it through any fault of his own?"

"We don't know that yet. We thought it best to lay him off till we found out."

"Is that your general practise?"

"When anything of this kind happens—yes."

"Suppose you had been in his place, don't you think you would have done as he did?"

"I presume I should."

"How much money was in that safe?"

"Four hundred and forty thousand dollars."

"In cash, was it?"

"Yes."

"How many people, to your knowledge, knew the combination of that safe?"

"Three."

"Good! We will go into that matter a little more."

CHAPTER VI.

THE CIPHER COMBINATION.

"Who are the three men who knew the combination of that safe at the time it was shipped on Billy Simpson's car?" asked the detective.

"I am one. The general superintendent is another, and the man at the point of destination whose duty it was to open the safe and deliver the goods was the third."

"Who is he?"

"Reginald Price. He is our Chicago superintendent."

"Was the combination which opened the safe an old one—that is, had it been used for the safe for a considerable time?"

"No. The combination was changed the same day that the money was shipped from Helena."

"By whose order?"

"My name."

"Who changed it?"

"The general superintendent, in person."

"Is he stationed in Helena?"

"No; nor am I. But we both happened to be there on this occasion. It is the practise—a sort of unwritten law with our company—that when any great sum of money is to be shipped in cash, so that a special safe is used to convey it, the combination of that safe shall be changed by the highest officer in charge at the time at the point of shipment."

"And you were that officer?"

"I happened to be there at the time, but I was only visiting. Nevertheless, the superintendent came to me, and asked me if I would set the lock."

"And you——"

"I replied that I did not know how to do it; but I told him that I would accompany him to the room where the safe was awaiting us, and stand by while he made the alteration."

"You did that?"

"Yes; I even selected the three numbers he used. They were——"

"Never mind what they were, for the present. The point is that you know positively that the combination was changed at that time?"

"Yes. Positively."

"And you also know that there was no other person in that room?"

"Certainly."

"Was there any place in that room at the time where a third person might have been hidden without your knowledge?"

"Positively, no."

"What was done then—after the combination was changed?"

"The money was taken from another safe that stood beside that one, and placed in the safe that was shipped on the 'Skidoo.' The safe was then closed, and the dial was given several turns to lock it."

"And then——"

"Three paper seals were pasted across the points of contact between the door and the body of the safe; then I returned to the office which I called mine while I was there."

"Now, tell me, if you please, how the new combination was transmitted to Mr. Reginald Price at Chicago, and when that was done."

"It was telegraphed to him."

"In cipher, I suppose?"

"In a form of cipher—yes."

"What form?"

"I have a copy of that telegram here with me. Would you like to see it?"

"I certainly would."

The president of the express company selected a paper from among others in his pocket and gave it to the detective; and Nick Carter read:

"We have lost five separate opportunities to secure Baker & Co.'s business. If you will call on them on the seventeenth, at 52 Graydon Street, and make them a proposition based on the par value, I think they will open up all right."

This rather mystically constructed telegram was ad-

dressed to Reginald Price, local superintendent of the express company at Chicago and was signed by the general superintendent of the company.

"Am I to understand," asked the detective, "that this telegram contains the combination?"

"Yes. But you must also understand that others would not know even that much."

"Not unless the telegram was read by some person who understood your methods."

"You mean by a former employee?"

"Yes."

"Even so; how would it be possible for that person to decipher the combination itself?"

"I think," replied the detective quietly, "that if a person knew that this message contained the combination, it would be a very easy matter to dig the combination out of it."

"Can you do it?"

"Easily."

"Perhaps you can tell me right now, with what you have in your hand, what that combination was. It was one of the few facts that were not printed in the papers. Notwithstanding the fact that the robber knew the combination, and compelled Billy Simpson, who did not know it, to open the safe for him, the combination has not been permitted to get out."

"I can tell you what it is."

"Tell me, then."

"It is 12—47—95."

"Great Scots! Carter, how did you find that out?"

"From the telegram."

"Tell me how. We thought it was well concealed."

"Not to one whose profession it is to decipher such things."

"Tell me how you did it. Let me see if it is the right method."

"Your message says that you have *lost* five separate opportunities, etc.; and after that it mentions three numbers."

"Yes."

"It takes three numbers to open the safe."

"Yes."

"The numbers mentioned in the telegram are 17, 52, and 100. In other words, you have instructed your agent in Chicago to call upon a fictitious personage or company on the seventeenth of the month at number 52, on a stated street, and offer him something at par: and everybody knows that par is always—or almost always—100."

"Well?"

"If I lose *five* at each separate opportunity, I take five from each of the three numbers; and so, instead of 17—52—100, I have 12—47—95: and that was the combination of the safe."

"By thunder! Carter, you are——"

"Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"When was that message sent to the agent in Chicago?"

"One hour after the shipment of the safe."

"In other words the combination was not even put on the wire until after the safe was out of your hands and on its way to its destination."

"Exactly."

"Have you forgotten, Mr. Whitney, that the robbers had an expert telegrapher with them, and that they carried a loop of the telegraph-wire into the woods where they set up two instruments?"

"No."

"That loop was probably arranged in ample time for them to receive the telegram which contained the cipher combination."

"I see that much; but how did they manage to read it correctly? The telegram was received in Chicago all right."

"I have no doubt of that. I have already said that they had two instruments set up in the woods. We will say that the operator who had those two instruments in charge was seated so that he faced the north."

"Well?"

"The instrument under his right hand could command the wire *east* of him; the other would command the wire *west* of him. When a message came in from the east—that is, when any office *west* of him was called from an office *east* of him, he answered the call, received, and wrote down the message, and then if it was one which he wished to have continued on its way to its destination, he merely repeated it with the other instrument; and vice versa."

"I see."

"There was a break in the line there, where he was. He received every message that was sent over that line in either direction, *and he forwarded each one to its destination; save those which would have interfered with his plans.*"

"And those——"

"And such messages died in that impromptu office in the woods."

"I understand all that, now; but again, how did he know how to read that cipher when he received it?"

"How did I know how to read it?"

"But you already knew that the message contained the combination in cipher. He did not have that information."

"How do you know that he did not?"

"Anyhow, it is not logical that he did know it."

"Possibly not; but there is one thing which events that happened afterward go to prove that he did know all about."

"What was that?"

"He knew that the cash was to be shipped by that

train, and in an extra safe. The fact that Simpson was ordered to throw out *two* safes from the car proves that."

"Well?"

"A smart man at the junction of those wires in the woods, knowing that much, would have found little difficulty in working the cipher out of that message to Price, in Chicago."

"He certainly did know it; but all the same I don't think that an ordinary man would have seen through that at once."

"An ordinary man, when he attempts an extraordinary thing, becomes himself extraordinary. If the first attempt to open that safe had not succeeded, it would have been tried the other way around. The robber would have said to himself that doubtless you doubled on your tracks in sending that combination, and instead of deducting five, he would have added five the next time; and if that hadn't succeeded, he would have tried it another way."

"I don't understand."

"Why, if 12—47—95 had not succeeded, he would have tried 22—57—105, and if that had failed he would have tried the numbers you used, 17—52—100; and from that he would have gone on indefinitely with the three original numbers and the 5 as a basis for his operations until he had gotten tired and used dynamite. As it was, he hit the combination the first time."

"Things seem to be so infernally simple when you explain them, Carter, that I begin to think that we are all damned fools, and that it only needs a smart man to discover the unpleasant fact."

"You are not so far wrong in that opinion as you think. We are all ostriches, hiding our heads and thinking that the whole body is out of sight; and the smartest of us are not free from that folly, either."

"Anyhow, you have made clear to me the greatest puzzle of the whole affair."

CHAPTER VII.

INEXPLICABLE COINCIDENCES.

It was then that the detective turned to Mr. Ralph Overton, the father of the young lady who was so strangely missing.

"Now, sir," he said, "I think it is time to take up your part of the case, and with your permission and that of the others, I am going to ask Mr. Whitney and Mr. Watson to permit us to hold our consultation alone."

The two presidents at once left their seats.

"Shall we wait for you down-stairs, Carter?" asked the president of the railroad.

"Not unless you think of something else about which you would wish to consult me; and in that case you might meet me at the station fifteen minutes before the 'Skidoo' is to leave for the West."

"Very good," they agreed; and took their departure after shaking hands with the detective.

"Now, Mr. Overton," said Nick, as soon as they were alone together, "before we go into this matter very deeply, I wish to assure you that I sympathize with you sincerely. I can see that you are suffering, and that you have controlled your impatience with difficulty while I have been talking with the other gentlemen. But the information I have gleaned from them, while it does not amount to much in the main, is really an important preliminary to the work that you wish me to do."

"I understand you, Mr. Carter."

"The abduction of your daughter is an exceedingly important factor in this entire case."

"It is important to me, sir."

"I mean that if it were not for the almost certainty that the robbers knew about that shipment of cash long before it was made, and had laid their plans for it accordingly, I would be of the unqualified opinion that the robbery was merely an incident that was associated with the abduction of Miss Overton."

"I don't understand."

"I should be of the opinion that the plot was hatched, and the plans laid for the abduction alone, without regard to the robbery, were it not for the fact that the robbers made plain the fact that they knew of that shipment of cash; not only that, but that they had planned to steal that cash; and not only that either, but they had planned very far ahead. The reading of the cipher telegram proves that."

"Well?"

"The abduction could not have been a mere incident to the robbery."

"I have supposed it was."

"Tell me why you have supposed that?"

"Why, there wasn't anything else for me to suppose."

"Tell me exactly what you have thought about it."

"I have supposed that as the chief of the train-robbers stood there by the steps of the car while the passengers who had been lined up and robbed passed in review before him, that he was attracted by the beauty of my daughter, and so commanded her to stand aside; then——"

"But such an idea as that will not hold water at all, Mr. Overton."

"Why not?"

"In the first place, although I have never knowingly seen your daughter, I do not doubt that there were other women among that train-load of passengers who were just as beautiful and just as attractive as she was."

"Possibly."

"To you and to her mother—and, perhaps, to another,

somewhere—she is unquestionably the most beautiful creature in the world; but you must remember that we do not all see alike in such matters, else there would be but one beautiful woman in the world."

"That is quite true."

"We must remember that Miss Overton was among the very last to pass into the car—or to appear to do so."

"Yes."

"We must figure out that when the passengers were lined up to be robbed she was placed in that position purposely—so that she would be among the very last."

"I don't see——"

"Wait. We must remember that it is twenty years now since train-robbers have lined passengers up outside the train and robbed *them*. They have been content with the contents of the express and mail-cars and have let the passengers severely alone."

"That is true."

"So this particular robbery might be called an innovation."

"I suppose that is true."

"Then, the robbers did another thing, and *one which has never been done before*. At least, I do not happen to recall a case of it."

"What is that?"

"They went through the cars while the passengers were outside, and dumped the contents of all the hand-baggage in the train upon the seats."

"Yes."

"*When they arrived at the stateroom occupied by your daughter and her friend they did not do that; they took the baggage—all of it.*"

"What do you conclude from that, Mr. Carter?"

"I conclude from that these two things: First, that it was intended to take your daughter from that train, and second, that the robbers were perfectly well aware of the fact that your daughter occupied that stateroom."

"I begin to think so myself."

"There can be no other conclusion, from the facts as we have them. They knew where her baggage was to be found. They took it. They searched through it and found the checks for the trunks. They even went to the baggage-car and secured the trunks. Don't you see that the abduction of your daughter becomes, in the light of all that, the prime cause of the stoppage of the train?"

"But there is the immense amount of money stolen; there is the fact that the robbers knew the money to be there; there is the fact that they had taken pains to discover the combination of the safe; there is all that, Mr. Carter."

"I grant you that; and on the other side of the question there is the fact that after the express-car was robbed the passengers were lined up outside—which is an innovation; there is the fact that your daughter and her friend were placed at the end of the line, so they would be the last to enter the car on their return—which strikes me under the circumstances as being something more than a coincidence; there is the fact that the robbers went through the train, robbing the hand-baggage, which is not only an innovation, but which was palpably a blind on their parts; there is the fact that out of all that hand-baggage, your daughter and Miss Yearney owned the only baggage that was literally removed; there is the fact that she and her friend were chosen from among all the others, and there is the fact that the robbers went to considerable trouble to secure the trunks—*four* of them. One trunk might have been easy; but *four!*"

"You think, then, that the abduction of my daughter was the original plot?"

"I think it was *an* original plot. I think also that the robbery was *an* original plot. I think that the two had no connection in the beginning."

"But that really the two incidents are separate cases?"

"In the beginning they were separate; in the end they came together and made one."

"I think I understand you now."

"Did you know that your daughter was to return on that particular train, at that time?"

"Not until she had started; and that is another point that I forgot. She was returning a week sooner than she intended."

"I see."

"She decided to come on that day only a short time before she actually started. She wired her mother to that effect only an hour before she actually did start."

"Good! I begin to see light now."

"I am glad you do; I do not."

"Where is your home, Mr. Overton? Not here, in Monkton?"

"No; in Chicago."

"The point that you make is that she had not decided herself when she would return until within a comparatively short time before she actually started?"

"Yes."

"And that, therefore, she not having known the fact herself, and you not having known it, it would have been impossible for a plot for her abduction from that train to have been matured?"

"Yes."

"But she sent her mother a telegram; we know that telegrams were intercepted in the woods, *and we do not know how long a time that arrangement for intercepting telegrams had been in existence.*"

"That is true."

"Now, perhaps, you will tell me *why* she changed her mind about the time of her return, Mr. Overton."

"I cannot tell you that for the reason that I do not know it."

"Did you discuss the change of your daughter's plan with her mother?"

"Yes."

"What was her opinion? Mothers often know a great deal more about the inside operations of a daughter's mind than fathers."

"She was as much in the dark as I."

"You are quite sure about that?"

"At least, she did not express any opinion on the subject to me."

"I will ask you some direct and leading questions about your daughter, Mr. Overton."

"Yes?"

"Was she entirely happy?"

"What has her condition of mind to do with the fact that she was forcibly abducted from a passenger-train in the mountains of southern Montana?"

"Was she entirely happy?"

"She professed to be content, sir."

"You reply to my question rather strangely, Mr. Overton."

"My daughter was about to be married."

"I see. To whom?"

"To an English gentleman—the Earl of Cravanath."

"Humph! One of those international marriages, eh? Is he young, handsome, rich, attractive, *and is your daughter in love with him?*"

"He is young, rather good-looking, possesses attractions, but is not rich, sir."

"And how about the last part of my question?"

"The match, I regret to say, was made by her mother. I have never fully approved of it; but I have been outargued in the matter."

"By your daughter? Or by her mother?"

"Mrs. Overton desires the marriage very much."

"I see; and your daughter?"

"She was content with it."

"I take it, then, that she is *not* in love with the Earl of Cravanath."

"No."

"When was this marriage to take place?"

"In about a month from now."

"Is there another man in the case?"

"Another man? What do you mean?"

"Is your daughter in love with another? Answer me frankly, please."

"I think she was at one time."

"When?"

"Possibly all the time. I have not discussed the matter with her lately. It was a tabooed subject between us, sir."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MEN BEHIND THE DOOR.

The detective left his chair and crossed the room to the window.

He stood there some moments, thinking, and then as quietly he returned and resumed his seat.

"Is your daughter a high-spirited girl, Mr. Overton?"

"Extraordinarily so. Yes."

"Who is the man with whom she was, or is, in love?"

"James Folsom by name."

"What is he?"

"A young lawyer in Chicago."

"Poor?"

"Yes."

"Honest? Upright? In other ways, worthy of your daughter?"

"He is honest, I suppose. I do not like him."

"I suppose that at one time or another you forbade him the house?"

"Yes."

"And have ordered Miss Overton to have nothing to do with him?"

"Yes; many times."

"Did you make any threats in connection with the affair?"

"I told her that I would disinherit her if she married Folsom. That is all."

"How old is she?"

"Twenty."

"With whom had she been visiting on this occasion?"

"Her aunt—my sister."

"Is your sister in sympathy with the girl, or with you, in this matter?"

"With me, I suppose."

"Has Folsom been away from Chicago since your daughter has been from home?"

"Not once. Not at all."

"So you thought it best to have him watched, did you?"

"Yes."

"Is he in Chicago now?"

"He was there a week ago, when I came away."

"You left there, I suppose, the morning after the robbery?"

"Yes."

"Who is Miss Yearney?"

"My daughter's chosen friend."

"How long a time has your daughter been from home?"

"Three—no, four weeks—up to the time of her disappearance."

"Has Miss Yearney been with her all the time?"

"Yes."

"Do you know anything about the opinions of Miss Yearney concerning the proposed marriage of your daughter with the earl?"

"No; only I have thought that Miss Yearney would like to marry the earl herself. She is an ambitious girl, and——"

"Yes. By the way—you are a wealthy man, are you not?"

"I am called so—yes."

"And that reminds me that there is one question which I neglected to ask of Mr. Whitney. Perhaps you can answer it for me."

"What is it?"

"To whom did the four hundred and forty thousand dollars that was stolen belong? Of course, I know that the express company is responsible for it; but who owned the actual money? Do you know?"

Mr. Overton hesitated some time before he replied, and then he asked:

"Is that a necessary question to the case, Mr. Carter?"

"If I had not so regarded it, I would not have asked it."

"It belonged to me."

"To *you!*"

"Yes. I am interested in mining properties. That money was the proceeds of a cash sale less the commissions that had just been made for me of one of them."

"I see."

"It has not, however, appeared in the prints that the money was mine. It has not been divulged to whom it was consigned. I have asked that it be not known. Mr. Whitney and I are old friends, and—well, I should prefer that it is not generally known that the money was mine. I have no good reason for that, save that reticence is natural to me."

"So you have sustained a double loss."

"Decidedly."

"I don't suppose that the loss of the money will seriously inconvenience you, will it?"

"Nobody likes to lose——"

"I know that; but it will not force you into bankruptcy, will it?"

"Certainly not."

"Now, one more question about James Folsom."

"Well?"

"How positive are you that he was in Chicago up to the time that you left there?"

"I had my reports from the two men who were watching him."

"And that is all? You did not see him yourself?"

"No."

"I think that is all for the present, Mr. Overton. I have about time now to complete some things I wish to do and to catch the 'Skidoo' for the West."

"Do you object to my going with you on that train, Mr. Carter?"

"No; not if you will consent to be guided by me entirely."

"I will do that. And there is something I wish to say before we part."

"Yes? What is it?"

"I wish to tell you that I love my daughter with all my heart. I wish to say that possibly I have been too severe with her in regard to her love-affairs, and that I regard this awful affair as something in the nature of a punishment. It is a terrible thing, Mr. Carter, for a father to think of his daughter as in the hands of a gang of outlaws, where God alone knows what might happen to her. She may be dead by this time; I find myself almost praying that she is dead when I think of the awful fate that may have been hers. Outwardly I am calm; but——"

He broke down utterly and wept; and the detective stepped forward quickly and grasped his hand.

"Control yourself, Mr. Overton," he said. "We must hope for the best; and I think that there are circumstances connected with this case which should be encouraging to you."

"What are they? For God's sake, tell me what they are!"

There are three of them: First, that there was involved in the affair a deliberate plot to abduct Miss Overton—or Miss Yearney—or both; but the point is that they were the objective points of a part of that plot. Second, that every effort was made on the part of the robbers to conceal the fact—for a time at least—that there had been an abduction at all. And third, the fact that the robbers were at great pains to provide the young ladies with their baggage."

"What do you argue from all that?"

"I argue that at least no immediate harm was intended to be visited upon either of them. You have received no request for a ransom, and hence I conclude——"

"How do you know I have not?"

"Have you?"

"No."

"You would have told me at once if you had."

"What were you about to state?"

"That the abduction was not an impulse, and hence neither of the young ladies were in immediate danger of suffering indignities at the hands of their captors. If the chief had merely wanted to steal a woman away, he would have seen but one. If the robbers had intended to steal *women*—I use the plural—they would have taken *more than two*. The fact that two were taken proves to my mind that they were intended as company for each other, and the fact that the baggage was taken proves that it was intended to render them as comfortable as possible in their captivity."

"You encourage me very much, sir."

"I am of the honest opinion, Mr. Overton, that notwithstanding the fact that your daughter has been stolen away by a band of train-robbers, that when we find her she will be unharmed."

"God grant that it may be so, sir!"

"Amen!"

"I may accompany you on the train to-night, then?"

"Certainly."

"And now you wish to be alone, I suppose?"

"If you please; yes."

As soon as Overton had gone, Nick crossed the room that had remained closed all this time, and upon opening it, his three assistants passed through and joined him. They were Chick, Ten-Ichi, and Patsy.

"Ten-Ichi," said the detective, "I want you to send a wire to James Folsom, lawyer, Chicago, at once. Tell him to take the first train for Monkton City and to inquire at the Langhorne Hotel for John Jones. You will be Mr. Jones, and wait here for him, and you will sign Della Overton's name to the message."

"All right, sir."

"Patsy."

"Yes, sir."

"You are to go at once to Mr. Whitney, the president of the express company, and tell him that I sent you for an order appointing you as an assistant to Billy Simpson on the express-car out to-night by the 'Skidoo.' If he objects, remind him that he is to aid and not hinder me."

"Won't Simpson tumble to who and what I am?"

"Sure—if you give him a chance. But you are to tell him at once that you are a detective whom I have sent out with him for the one and only purpose of talking with him all the way to Conyers station; and I want you to pump him dry of every bit of knowledge he posseses, whether it seems pertinent to the case or not, from the time a week or two before the robbery up to the present moment. You know just how to do that, and if you are frank with him he will enter into the spirit of the thing and help you all he can."

"Sure."

"And you, Chick, are to go right through to Helena; find out there who Della Overton's aunt is; find out everything that she knows about the conduct of her niece while she visited her; find out all about the letters received by Miss Overton while she was there; find out everything that those two girls did while they were there; who they knew; who they talked with; what telegrams they received and sent—and, in short, their histories during the duration of their visit."

"I go with you on the 'Skidoo'?"

"You go on the 'Skidoo,' but not with me. We won't know each other at all."

"And when I have finished in Helena, what then?"

"You will have heard from me in the meantime, telling you where and when to report; but if you should have anything to say before you do hear from me, telegraph it to Conyers station, making use of our cipher."

"That is all, is it?"

"Yes. I shall head for the train an hour before the leaving-time. We won't talk together again until we each have something to tell to the other."

CHAPTER IX.

THE ACTIVITY OF A TRAIN-ROBBER.

Notwithstanding the dismissal, Chick hesitated at the door before leaving the room.

"What's on your mind?" asked the detective.

"Of course, I overheard all that conversation," said Chick.

"Certainly. That is what you were there for."

"I would like to express an opinion about the matter."

"Well, what is it?"

"I don't think that the two affairs had anything to do with each other."

"What two affairs?"

"The robbery of the train, and the abduction."

"What *do* you think about it?"

"I don't know what to think about it; but I don't believe that the abduction of Miss Overton was originally associated with the express robbery, in the slightest degree."

"You use the word 'originally'; why do you do that?"

"Because I think that the fact that they occurred together was merely a coincidence, or, in other words, the result of accident."

"There seemed to be a strange unanimity of system about the two affairs, Chick."

"That's no dream."

"Let us look at it a moment."

"Well?"

"The train is stopped at the station. The engine is sent away down the track. Six men ride out of the woods on horseback and two of them conduct the rob-

bery of the express-car while the remaining four stand guard. One of the six acts as chief——"

"They always have a chief, don't they?"

"Be silent, please. The chief does all the talking. He orders two safes chucked out of the car. He knows the combination of that safe that contains the money, *and that proves that they were not only after the money, but it proves that they knew how to get it.*"

"Well?"

"The chief of the robbers does all the directing of affairs."

"Yes."

"When the money is taken from the safe, he orders the passengers from the cars. When they are lined up the chief makes a speech to them. The chief passes the hat, or one of the hats. When that is done, it is the chief who sends some of his men through the cars to inspect the hand-baggage, and it is therefore by his direction that the personal baggage of the two young ladies is taken from the stateroom."

"What in the world——"

"You wait. It is the chief who arranged that line of passengers outside the train. It is he who orders them back into the train and tells them how to go there. It is the chief who stands guard at the steps where they enter. It is the chief who selects the two victims who are to be abducted. All this goes to prove that it was the chief who directed the robbery of the express-car, and that it was the same man who selected the two girls to be taken away, doesn't it?"

"I suppose it does."

"Well, then?"

"Well, then, yourself? Where is your theory as expressed to the gentlemen here, that the two affairs were separate in the beginning, and that they only came together through an accident of some kind?"

"I don't know, Chick. I am as much at sea as you are. I am only giving you a little, that is all; but there is one fact in connection with the robbery which has not been mentioned in the papers, and which only got out to-day. It is interesting."

"What is it?"

"The six horses ridden by the six bandits when they robbed the train belonged, and still belong, on a ranch a few miles from that spot—*and the horses are there now—where they belong.*"

"Is that true?"

"There isn't the slightest doubt of it."

"How did they get there?"

"They have always been there, save for a few hours."

"Do you mean that the robbers merely swiped them for the time being, and turned them loose again after the robbery?"

"Yes."

"Then how did they get their boodle away from the station? How——"

"How did they manage to carry away four heavy trunks without leaving a trail that could be followed as plainly as a highway is what you mean to ask, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"You know, of course, don't you, that there has never since the robbery been found the slightest indication of a trail?"

"Yes."

"And while you were in that room didn't you hear Mr. Winslow, the president of the railroad, make the statement that for more than two hours the entire system was out of commission, and that his train-despatcher stopped every train on the line that was near enough to the scene of the outrage to suggest the possibility of an accident?"

"Yes."

"Well, now couple that with another fact that we know; that the robbers had a telegraph operator in the woods."

"What of that?"

"Why, that operator knew that trains had been stopped. He knew that the track was clear for a great distance east and west from Conyers station, didn't he?"

"Probably."

"Now, doesn't that prove to you, Chick, that there was only one way by which the robbers could have made their escape without leaving a trail behind them?"

"Do you mean by the railroad?"

"Certainly. They had their Winchesters to carry; they had the bags in which they had put the plunder to carry: they had four trunks and two or three bags to carry, and as far as we know there were only six men in the outfit."

"Do you suppose they had another engine hidden around there somewhere?"

"Don't talk nonsense. I *do* think, however, that they had a hand-car."

"By Jove, Nick, that's a sure thing!"

"A hand-car would have taken them thirty, forty, fifty, or even sixty miles from the spot where the robbery was committed, without the danger of meeting a train and being smashed."

"Yes; but they would have to go west from there."

"Sure."

"If they had gone in the other direction, they would have met their own locomotive returning, and the freight-car, and——"

"And they knew that as well as you know it."

"Of course; but wouldn't they have been reported as passing the station that is called Peachblossom, as well as other places?"

"More than likely. That is the puzzling thing about it—until we get on the ground to investigate."

"You haven't heard of such a report, have you?"

"No. And I have spent the whole morning among the railroad men. I posted myself as well as I could before I called upon the president."

"Nick, there were six men, two women, four trunks, several bags, six Winchesters, and other impedimenta for them to carry."

"More than that, Chick. There were more than six men, for there was the man in the woods running the telegraph instruments, covering their trail. Don't you know what he had to do to assist in that escape?"

"You tell."

"He had to stop every message that was bound from the east going west, and change it so that the station-agents at Peachblossom and other places beyond wouldn't tumble to what was going on."

"Sure."

"And to do that, he had to be not only an expert telegraph operator, but he had to understand the particular abbreviations in use by that line, and he had to know thoroughly the business of a train-despatcher as well as be familiar with all the office calls along the line."

"Humph! I wish you would tell me what you intend to do when you get to Conyers, Nick."

"I intend to find Miss Overton and Miss Yearney."

"That reminds me of another thought I had," said Chick.

"What is it?"

"You have been heading all your energies upon the supposition that Miss Overton was the objective person in the abduction business. Now, why might not it have been the other girl just as well as her?"

"It might. I know something about Miss Yearney already. In fact, I knew a lot about both of them before I asked any questions in this town. That is why I stopped over in Chicago."

"Is there anything about the information you have that will assist me in the inquiries I have to make in Helena?"

"No; and besides, I don't wish you to be hampered by any of the hearsay knowledge that I have gathered about either of the girls. Otherwise I would tell you."

"I understand."

"I want you to go upon that inquiry untrammeled. Just find out what you can and report the facts that you discover to me."

"All right."

"Now, have you got anything more to suggest?"

"Not a thing."

"Well, you might use up the time between now and the departure of the train in hanging around the station and picking up any information you can."

"And I will see you on the train, I suppose?"

"Yes; only I don't think it advisable that we should know each other after we part here. It is generally known now, from one end of the road to the other, that I have been called into this case, and therefore I have got to work entirely in the open. I will have Patsy with me, for I shall direct him to leave the train at Peachblossom or the station beyond that; and if the case is not finished, I will have you back with me as soon as your work in Helena is done."

"Sure."

"So, I think, we will say good-by right here—unless, of course, you should pick up any information around the station that you think I ought to know about. If that happens, you will find a way to let me know about it."

"I certainly will."

"Then, so long, Chick."

The two detectives parted then, nor did they again have occasion to speak together before the departure of the train, or during the run from Monkton City to Conyers.

During that trip, however, Nick did find an opportunity to convey to Patsy his desire that the latter should leave the train at Peachblossom, and while keeping himself in disguise await further orders there.

Mr. Overton was, of course, on the train with the detective; but, at Nick's request, he also continued on to Peachblossom, to await him there.

And so it happened that when the "Skidoo" stopped at Conyers at one o'clock the following day just long enough to permit the detective to leap from the train, he was the only passenger who alighted: and in another instant the flier was speeding away again toward the West.

CHAPTER X.

THE BAD MAN OF THE COUNTY.

The detective was naturally armed with all the authority that he could possibly require in the matter of his investigation, and as soon as the train had pulled away, he hurried into the station to find the agent, who was awaiting him in the doorway.

"I supposed you were notified by telegraph of my coming," said the detective.

"Yes," was the somewhat surly reply.

"And I also suppose that I am not the first that has been here on this business; eh?"

"I haven't kept count of them; there has been too many, mister."

"What's the matter? Don't you feel well to-day?"

"I'm well enough. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing at all: only you act as if you had a pain in your temper. I hope it isn't serious."

"It is nobody's business but my own, if I have, mister."

Nick studied the man in silence for a moment, and then suddenly he stepped forward, seized him, tossed him into the air, turned him so that he fell head downward, and caught him as he was descending; and then he stood him on his head on the platform of the station, holding him by the heels in that position, despite his profanity and protests.

Then he released him suddenly and permitted him to sprawl on the boards.

"Get up," he said, then. "I did that to demonstrate to you how easily I could break you into pieces if I wished to do so; and now I want you to understand that at the first sign of surliness on your part I'll clap a pair of handcuffs onto you, and ship you to Monkton by the next train, as being implicated with the train-robbers. Do you understand that?"

"I wasn't. I didn't know a cussed thing about them."

"Possibly you did not; but that wouldn't save you from being charged with it, if I chose to make the charge. Now, how far is it from here to that place in the woods where the robbers set up their telegraph office?"

"A matter of half a mile."

"Take me there."

"Now?"

"Yes; right now."

The detective spent half an hour around that interesting spot in the woods and discovered nothing for his pains.

"There has been at least a hundred men here who called themselves detectives," the agent told him.

"Where do you live?" asked the detective, when they were back again at the station.

"In that house over there;" and the man pointed toward the house that had been mentioned to the detective by Mr. Winslow.

"Very good," said Nick. "I want you to remain here at the station and wait for me until I go over and take a look through your house."

"What's that for?" demanded the agent.

"For instance, my friend. Chiefly because you were so unpleasant when I arrived; otherwise I shouldn't have thought of doing it."

"You'll scare the women to death."

"Oh, I guess not. The other detectives didn't scare them, did they?"

"The other detectives didn't bother them."

"I suppose not. Well, neither will I."

"I'm not going to stay here and let you go ransacking through my house."

"You are going to do that very thing, or you will go east on the next train with handcuffs on your wrists; take your choice."

The detective turned away without another word, and ten minutes' brisk walk took him to the house in question.

But although he searched it from top to bottom, he found nothing to indicate that the station-agent had any guilty knowledge of the affair; and after a little he returned again to the station.

"Find anything?" asked the agent jeeringly.

"Yes. I found a very civil and polite woman there, who has the misfortune to be the wife of a surly brute who is going to lose his job at this station mighty quick unless he replies civilly to a few questions that I am about to ask."

"What are they, then?"

"Is it true about those horses being found?"

"Yes."

"Why weren't they discovered sooner?"

"They were found at once, only the owner kept still about it. He missed them, and then he found them, and he wouldn't have known anything about the fact that they had been used by the robbers at all, if there hadn't been a note tied into the mane of one of them."

"A note, did you say?"

"Yes. Want to see it? I've got it here."

"Show it to me."

The agent went into the ticket-office, and in a moment returned with the note in his hand.

It, read:

"We took the liberty of borrowing six of your horses, without permission. We return them together with a ten-dollar bill, as payment for the use of them."

"Was there ten dollars with this note?" asked the detective.

"Yes; pinned fast to it."

The detective put the note into his pocket, and he thought to himself:

"The robbers could have turned those horses back where they got them, and the probability would have been that nobody would have suspected that they had been used at all. They would not have been missed. And again it isn't likely that they needed the horses at all, so it follows that they were taken and used in the first place, and that the note was left with them, in the second place, *because they wished it known that they had taken them.*"

He turned to the agent again, then.

"How far is it from here to Peachblossom?" he asked.

"Twelve miles."

"I don't suppose you have a hand-car around here, have you?"

"No; nor an automobile, either."

"Is there a hand-car at Peachblossom?"

"No."

The detective left the station and started down the track; but he called back after a moment.

"Come out here and show me where the passengers were lined up," he said; and the station-agent pointed out the spot to him.

"How long did the train stay here from first to last?" asked the detective.

"Ten minutes less than three hours."

"Were you locked up inside of the car with the others?"

"Yes."

"Didn't your wife hear the shooting?"

"Yes."

"What did she do?"

"Crawled under the bed and hid."

"You didn't recognize anything familiar about the faces or voices of the robbers, did you?"

"Not about the faces. They were all covered up."

"About their voices, then?"

"Yes, I thought I did."

"Then why haven't you said anything about it before now?"

"Because I haven't been asked. It ain't safe around here to know too much. It would be a regular trick of one of the robbers to show up around here and play the detective a little, just to find out how much I knew, or how much others knew, and if I knew too much, to let daylight into me. I ain't taking no chances. But I know that you're a regular detective, all right."

"Sure. Tell me about that voice. Whose was it? The chief?"

"Yes."

"You thought you recognized it?"

"Yes."

"For whom?"

"Big Jim Folsom."

The detective had half-turned away, but now he wheeled like lightning and for a moment stared at the station-agent. Then, very quietly, he asked:

"Who did you say?"

"Big Jim Folsom."

"I thought that was the name. Who is he?"

"He's the bad man of this county. He's a holy terror, too, although there has never been anything of this kind said about him."

"Am I the first person to whom you have mentioned his name?"

"Yes."

"Because you are afraid of him?"

"Yes. I'd have told about it if I had been sure; but I wasn't. I only thought that the voice and the build of the man was like Big Jim's."

"Does he live around here?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Up beyond Peachblossom—about eight miles."

"Along the road, or back from it?"

"Both; about eight miles beyond Peachblossom, and about the same distance north of the railroad."

"Has he lived there long?"

"All his life, I reckon."

"Is there any other little thing connected with this affair that you know which you have not mentioned to others, or to me?"

"No."

"Do you happen to know if Jim Folsom happens to have relatives in Chicago?"

"He's got a brother there, I've heard say."

"Is his name Jim, too?"

"I don't know anything about him at all, only that I have heard that Big Jim goes east once a year to visit his brother in Chicago."

"What sort of a man is Big Jim, besides being a bad man?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"How does he live? How does he make a living?"

"He owns a big ranch. He's rich; at least, he is called well off around here."

"Is he an educated man?"

"I reckon so."

"How old is he?"

"Thirty-five, or thereabouts."

"I guess that will do for to-day. I am going to leave you now, but I will see you again, in all probability; and in the meantime, if anybody else should ask you about that voice business, you need not repeat what you have told me. Understand?"

"Yes. Where are you going? Don't you want a horse?"

"No. I'm going to take a little walk—of twelve miles."

"To Peachblossom?"

"In that direction—yes."

CHAPTER XI.

THE CLUE BESIDE THE TRACK.

The detective had determined from the start to make the journey on foot between Conyers and Peachblossom, and possibly continue it much farther than that.

Even before he heard about the return of the horses to their owners, he had been satisfied that the robbers had used some other method than that in making their escape.

Their plunder, the two additions to their party, and the four trunks rendered it imperative that they should have had at hand some means of conveyance which would not only transport them all in safety, but which would leave as little trail behind them as possible.

As he walked along he regretted that he had not indulged in more questions concerning the station and the surroundings at Peachblossom.

Then, suddenly, while he was turning the matters over in his mind, he stopped in his tracks.

"If the station at Peachblossom is anything like the one at Conyers," he mused, "it would have been no trouble at all for the train-robbers to have passed there without being seen or heard. I must not forget that it was almost dark at the time of the robbery; that it was quite dark at the time the passengers were driven into the car to be locked up there; and that night was well advanced by the time the robbers were ready to embark on their hand-car for their destination—whatever it was.

"It would be a simple matter for them to slip by a station like Conyers, in the dark, without being seen or heard.

"And even if there was a chance of detection, it could have been overcome by stopping the car just this side of Peachblossom, and by sending a man on ahead to call the station-agent from his post on one pretext or another; and to keep him away from it until the car had been taken past; and then the car could wait until the messenger caught up with it again."

He started on along the track, and as he walked he searched each side of the road narrowly; but all the while he was dwelling upon the new developments in the case.

The use that had been made of the name of Jim Folsom impressed him.

James Folsom was the name of the young lawyer in Chicago with whom Miss Overton's father said she was in love.

James Folsom was the name of the man to whom Ten-Ichi had been instructed to telegraph in the name of Della Overton.

And Jim Folsom—Big Jim Folsom—was the name of the man of whom the sound of the train-robbers' voice had reminded the station-agent at Conyers.

"There are altogether too many coincidences in this case," the detective thought. "Where there are so many apparent coincidences, it is pretty safe to say that there is a deliberate plan and intention behind each of them."

He did not mean, of course, that there was plan or intention behind the half-recognition of the voice of the big ranchman.

It was after five that afternoon when the detective arrived at the little station which glorified in the name of Peachblossom.

During the entire walk he had seen nothing whatever to indicate that the robbers had passed that way; and now, when he drew up at the station and saw that Mr. Overton was there waiting, and that a wandering and disreputable-looking Indian was seated at the far end of the platform whom he at once knew to be Patsy, he had just made this statement to himself:

"I shall follow this track on foot till I discover something, if it takes me all the way to Helena."

"What have you discovered, Mr. Carter?" was the greeting from Ralph Overton.

"I have discovered that twelve miles in southeastern Montana are equal to sixteen anywhere else on the face of the earth," replied the detective, smiling. "Literally, I have discovered very little; and I will tell you what that is if you will wait until I send that boozy Indian off about his business."

"Why? He is doing no harm."

"All the same, I don't want him around. He may have been sent here by somebody, for all we know, as a spy."

"Do you think it likely, Mr. Carter?"

"I could almost swear to it. Wait here, will you?"

"Yes."

Nick approached the pseudo Indian, and while he appeared to give him a piece of silver, in reality he said in a low tone:

"Go ahead along the track, Patsy, about two or three miles, and wait for me. Have you had anything to eat?"

"Yes; and I've got more with me."

"All right. Wait for me if it takes all night."

The detective turned away and rejoined Mr. Overton.

"I see that there is a house about half a mile back there from the station," he said. "We will go there and engage rooms for the night, if they can take us in. We will also get a bite of something to eat, and after that I will leave you."

"What! Leave me here alone?"

"Oh, not for long. For a time."

They turned their steps toward the house that Nick had indicated, and as they went along the detective said:

"By the way, speaking of that James Folsom—where did he come from originally?"

"Montana. It is my own native State, you know. I lived in Helena until four years ago."

"Was that where your daughter made the acquaintance of Folsom?"

"Yes. They have known each other since they were children."

"Is Helena Folsom's native town?"

"No. He comes from the country somewhere."

"Do you think it was this part of the State?"

"Now that you speak of it, I think it was; but just where I cannot say. You are not trying to connect him with this affair, are you?"

"Please do not bother yourself with what I am trying to do. If you wish to aid me, answer my questions and don't ask any. Has James Folsom got relatives around here that you know of, or that you have heard about?"

"I don't know a thing about it more than I have told you."

"Do you know any other Folsoms besides your James Folsom, in Chicago?"

"Yes; one. His partner in the law practise. William Folsom, his cousin."

"Thank you. That will be all for the present; and here we are at the house."

An hour later Nick Carter was again trudging afoot between the rails of the K. U. & T. road-bed, and two miles out from the station he came upon Patsy awaiting him.

"You didn't go far," he said to his young assistant.

"I've been a good deal farther than this—and back again," was the reply.

"Why did you return?" asked the detective.

"Because I found something up the road there which I thought you would like to hear about without losing any time."

"What is it?"

"Well, it's a heap of scrap-iron which has been blown into bits by dynamite, and there is a stick of the stuff near it that did not explode."

Nick was all attention at once.

"Could you tell what it was originally that was blown

up?" he asked. "Tell me as well as you can, for it will be quite dark by the time we get there, and—in short, Patsy, could the heap of scrap-iron that you found have been a hand-car once upon a time?"

"That is just what it was."

"How far up the road from where you met me just now?"

"About four miles. I came back at a dog-trot."

"All right. Let's take one now and get there as soon as possible."

And in another minute they were running along the track together, with their elbows pressed against their sides, so that in that way they were a very short time in covering the four miles.

Night had already fallen, but the detective produced his pocket search-light and began an examination around the place; and after he had spent an hour at this work, they returned to a heap of ties that were piled beside the roadway and seated themselves upon them.

"Patsy," he said, "it is a fortunate thing that the soil is almost all clay around here, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is; why?"

"Because footprints in clay last a long time. I am glad that you were thoughtful enough not to do any walking around that spot."

"Oh, I saw the footprints, all right, and I told myself that you would want to know about it right away, and that it was up to me to leave the spot alone until you saw it."

"Correct, Patsy. That place has told me a lot."

"Will you tell me? You know I didn't examine those things at all."

"Well, I will tell you exactly what it tells me. In the first place, the thing that was blown up with the dynamite was a hand-car."

"Yes."

"It was in good condition when it was blown up, too, and it was dragged thirty or forty rods into the flats away from the track before it was destroyed."

"Yes."

"And that shows that the men who blew it up not only wanted to rid themselves of the car, but they wanted also to fix it so that none of the railway track-walkers would ever see it; so that it would not be seen by anybody who would be likely to recognize what it had been."

"I thought that about it."

"So much for that part of it. Now, the ground is not soft around there, but it is clay, and it has retained a good many marks of feet. Among those marks are the impressions of two shoes of different sizes, each having French heels—women's shoes."

"Gee! is that so?"

"Yes. I managed to follow the women's tracks a little way beyond that point, until I lost them; but I went far enough to find a hard path which leads away toward the north. I am absolutely sure of one thing, Patsy."

"What is that?"

"I am sure that the train-robbers came to this point on a hand-car after they robbed the express-car down at Conyers; I am sure that they stopped here and dragged the car over there and destroyed it, after which they went away along that path, taking the women and the trunks with them. There is a very plain imprint of one of the trunks right there near the heap of scrap-iron. It is in the grass, to be sure, and not to be seen unless one looks for it; but it is there."

"Then our real trail begins here, doesn't it?"

"It certainly does."

"But I suppose we will have to wait until morning to follow it; eh?"

"We can follow that path to-night—and we will do that, too. If we lose it, we will camp and wait till morning."

Patsy was silent a moment, and then he said:

"I've got something on my mind that I want to say, but I don't want you to think that I am afraid because I say it."

"I know that you are not afraid, Patsy. What is it?"

"Do you think that we ought to take that trail alone? These fellows aren't the sort of crooks that we are usually up against, and——"

"And you are not thinking about yourself in the least, but you don't want to see me take too big a risk. Is that it?"

"We'll call it that; yes."

"All the same, Patsy, we will start on that trail whether we follow it to the end or not. We will try to find out where it will take us, at least; and when we have done that, we will decide what is best to do next."

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRAIN-ROBBER HELD UP.

The trail was plainer and broader than Nick Carter had dared to hope.

The path they followed, instead of becoming fainter, became more plain as they proceeded, with the result that, with the aid of the detective's light, they pursued it without difficulty across the flats and through a belt of woods until they came to a large open space, in the center of which was a collection of buildings; and daylight was just breaking when they arrived at that point.

"Patsy," said Nick, "unless I very greatly err, the gentleman who lives in that ranch-house yonder is named James Folsom, and he is known as 'the bad man of the county.' Otherwise Big Jim Folsom, ranchero, train-robber, and—just at present—outlaw. Come; we will go to the house and give him a call."

"And get plugged with a .45 for doing it," said Patsy.

"If you are afraid, kid, you can stay behind," replied the detective, as he started ahead. "The chances are that he doesn't know that he is suspected, and that we won't get plugged—unless we show our hands too soon."

The largest of the buildings was of course the objective house, for that was evidently the residence; and Nick Carter approached it boldly, closely followed by his young assistant.

The detective made no effort to conceal himself; that was not a part of his plan.

It was characteristic of Nick that he did not wish to undergo the delay that would have been necessary had he sought to procure assistance; for he argued that already it might be known at the house that he was on the trail, and the robbers, if they were indeed there, might make use of such an opportunity to escape.

Once he stopped and looked rather sadly upon Patsy; and then he said:

"Lad, I've a good notion to send you back."

"Well, I won't go if you do," was the hot retort; and the detective said no more, but continued on the way to the house.

They passed a corral where there were a number of horses; they passed outbuildings that were connected with the conduct of the ranch, and at last they came to the house, going around it part way in order to approach it from the front.

And as they did so, a big, red-faced man appeared on the wide porch and called out to them.

"Hello, strangers!" he said. "What might be wanted?"

"Breakfast might be wanted if it so happens that you've got some handy," replied the detective, approaching and mounting the steps to the porch. "We are about starved, this chap and I." He stepped upon the porch directly in front of the big man as he said this; and then, with a suddenness that was startling, the detective dropped two revolvers from his sleeves into his hands and held them at half-arm's length as he continued calmly and without raising his voice:

"And you might be wanted, Big Jim. Don't speak or move a finger if you wish to live a minute. Don't even breathe if you have to move a muscle to do it, or I shall shoot if you do."

The man remained perfectly still, gazing hard at the detective; and his clear, cold, piercing eyes showed not the least sign of fear.

"These pistols of mine are rather small in size, but they carry bullets that are big enough," said the detective. "We want you to take a walk out as far as the corral with us, Big Jim. You will lead the way and walk along with my young friend while I loiter along behind you. That's right. Straight to the corral, if you please—and don't try to look back or to make any signs, *if you please.*"

At the corral Nick guided those in front of him until he was sure that their actions could not be observed from the house, and then he called a halt.

Next he told Patsy to "go through" their captive and relieve him of any weapons he might be carrying; and when that was done, he said:

"You are Big Jim Folsom, are you not?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, you are the man who led the outfit that robbed the 'Skidoo' down at Conyers little more than a week back. Four hundred and forty thousand dollars in cash, some jewelry, watches, and that sort, some few hundreds of dollars more in loose cash, some hand-baggage, four trunks, and two young ladies were stolen from that train. The greater part of all that plunder is now in your possession. Some of it is in your house. The rest of it is where you can put your fingers on it. I want it *all*, Big Jim!"

"Oh! you do, eh?"

"Yes—or you."

"What do I get for mine, if I give up the goods?"

"You get about twenty years, I reckon."

"I thought you were making a proposition."

"I am."

"I don't see it. What do I get if *I do not* give up the goods, then?"

"You get plugged between the eyes right here. That's plain, isn't it?"

"Damn plain!"

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Just nothing at all. My hands are up in the air, so to speak. You've got the drop. It's your ante; I'm all in."

"All right. Put your hands behind you while my assistant puts the irons on them; and now take a seat on the ground while we put others on your ankles. That's right. And now tell me this: Are the two young ladies in your house at the present moment?"

"One of 'em is."

"Which one?"

"My wife; the one you know as Miss Yearney, which used to be her name, before she took mine, which was several years ago."

"Where is Miss Overton?"

"There isn't any Miss Overton that I know about."

"No? She's married, then?"

"You've called the turn, partner."

"Who did she marry?"

"A cousin of mine who bears the same name. He's a partner of my brother in Chicago."

"Where are they now?"

"I don't know, but I reckon they ought to be about in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, mister. They started for Japan. I suppose that you and her old man are mightily taken in about this here affair, aren't you? I suppose, maybe, you'd like to have me explain it, wouldn't you?"

"We are; and I would."

"What do I get if I tell the story?"

"I might ask for one year off the twenty. We'll call it nineteen."

"Well, it's this way: My wife likes to visit her friends in Chicago. She likes to call herself Miss Yearney when she's there. She says she has a better time, and I reckon she does. She visits with my brother and his wife, and she and Della are great chums.

"My wife stayed there quite a spell this trip, and one of her letters tells me all about an English earl that wants to marry Della for her dough, and I writes back and suggests that Della come out here for a visit and that we'll get cousin Jim here at the same time and let them get married right here.

"They try to arrange that, but old Overton and his wife are too smart for us, and the result is that finally Della persuades them to let her visit her aunt in Helena and take 'Miss Yearney' with her. Then I goes up to Helena and sees the bunch and I writes to cousin Jim to play sick and skip out here, too—which he does.

"While I am in Helena, I run across an old pal of mine who tells me that Della's father has sold a mine for the four-forty you have mentioned, and that with half a chance he can find out when the cash is to be shipped East, for that is one of the bargains between the buyer and seller, in order that nobody should be put wise as to the amount that was paid for the mine; and this pal of mine says it will be dead easy to hold up the train that carries it, and nail the boodle.

"He plans out the whole thing. He agrees at the proper time to bring down half a dozen men to help me with the hold-up while he does the fine work. He was train-despatcher on a big railroad in the East before he came West and went into mining—and other things.

"Then, after we had planned this thing, I have a happy thought, and I goes back to Della, and I says to her that if she will be guided by me I will see that she gets clean away with the man she loves, and nobody the wiser.

"You see, we know within a few days of the time when that money is to be shipped, and we have a friend in Helena who is to notify us of the exact day at the proper time—day and train; see? So I says to Della, 'All you've got to do is to promise me faithfully that you will start East by the train I say, when I telegraph you to start. You and May start together;' and I tells her that I'll hold up the train along here somewhere, and take her off.

"She thinks it is a huge joke; and so does cousin Jim. They agree to telegraph to the old folks an hour before they start—and there you are.

"My pal comes down here with his outfit. We get our information. We have everything ready. We stop the train by telegraph, as you know. We even get the combination of the safe by telegraph, and that's dead easy, too. Then we line up the passengers, and—well, you know the rest. We turns the horses loose. We only had 'em for a blind, anyhow. We comes up here on a hand-car which has been shipped down here to me in sections, by freight, and which I put together. When we are through with it, we blow it up—after sliding past Peachblossom in the dark.

"But neither cousin Jim nor Della will stand for the robbery, and they light out the same night—and so does my pal and his outfit, after we had divided the plunder.

"An' now, mister, that's the story. You needn't ask me to give any of my friends away, because I won't do it, not if you shoot me; and you needn't expect to get back any of that plunder, because you won't. It is hidden where you will never find it, and I sha'n't tell where it is, only on condition that I'm let go free.

"My wife ain't guilty only so far as guilty knowledge since the affair makes her so; and she told me last night that if I didn't give back my share of the plunder to the people it belonged to, she'd leave me.

"You've got the chief of the train-robbers, mister, but you ain't got the goods, and you won't get them, either—not unless the express company promises not to prosecute.

"That's my tale, and that's the truth and the whole truth. Miss Overton thought it was a lark, up to the last minute, just for her benefit.

"There ain't anybody here except a few cow-punchers to fight for me, and they are out on the range, so I reckon you can lead me away and—*that's all.*"

It *was* all, too.

Big Jim was sent to the capital to await trial, or a compromise on the part of the authorities on condition that he return the stolen property.

Chick was recalled from Helena; and in Monkton City Ten-Ichi reported that nobody had asked for John Jones at the hotel.

Mr. Ralph Overton returned to Chicago convinced that it did not pay to attempt to force a spirited girl to marry a man she despised.

THE END.

The next issue, No. 510, will be "The Last of the Outlaws; or, How Nick Carter Stopped the Cannon-ball."

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